



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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AS THE WAR WINDS DOWN, WHAT NEXT FOR IRAQ?

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Not for the first time in recent history, 2014 saw many [commentaries](#) yet again heralding the end of Iraq. What made 2014 different however was that the boilerplate predictions of Iraqi disintegration seemed less far-fetched than at any other time since the invasion of 2003. In June 2014, ISIS, as they were then known, took over about a third of Iraq including Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, amidst a total Iraqi military collapse. The very idea of Iraq was under threat as never before since the establishment of the modern state in 1921. Three years later and Iraq seems to have weathered the storm: a combination of international support, mass mobilization, the reconstruction of Iraqi security forces and great sacrifice have destroyed the so-called Islamic State (at least in its territorial state-like form) and allowed Iraq to survive its most serious existential challenge to date.

New realities have been created over the last three years; indeed, Iraq's political and security landscape today is unrecognisable from what it was in 2014. As is always the case, Iraq faces monumental challenges that must be met but it also faces opportunities that must not be squandered.

Sect and Conflict: A Thing of the Past?

To those who keep abreast with developments in Iraq, it was almost [immediately clear](#) that the fall of Mosul was a point of no return and that the Iraqi state was undergoing yet another reincarnation. If the years between 2003 and 2014 were characterised by the tension between [Shia-centric state-building and Sunni rejection](#), then the years since then may have seen the culmination of this tension with the victory of the former and the defeat of the latter.

If Shia-centric state-building is taken to mean the effort to ensure that the central levers of the state are in Shia (and more specifically Shia-centric) hands and that Shia identities are represented and empowered to the extent of leaving an imprint on the nature of the Iraqi state, then this has clearly been accomplished – perhaps irreversibly so. The most obvious

institutional manifestation of this is the Hashd al-Sha'bi/Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). This umbrella organisation encompasses some 40 mostly Shia paramilitary groups and was formed after Ayatollah Sistani issued a [fatwa](#) calling on Iraqis to join Iraq's security services to repel the Islamic State's (IS) advance. In 2016, the PMU – in their [various shades, orientations](#), Iranian ties and sometimes chequered history – were formally incorporated into Iraq's security infrastructure and tied to the office of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces through the [Hashd al-Sha'bi Law](#).

As for Sunni rejection, which can be seen as a spectrum of resentment against the post-2003 order running from begrudging acceptance to armed insurgency, events since 2014 may have fatally discredited the violent end of that spectrum. The sheer scale of the devastation that Sunni-majority areas have suffered, the mass displacement, the complete disarray if not redundancy of Sunni political elites have left Iraq's Sunni communities with few options other than to try to secure their interests by working with the Shia political classes. This has led to the [emergence](#) of new frameworks of political power at the local level. By remaining in their provinces and working with Iraqi security forces in the fight-back against IS, these local actors have attained a degree of credibility lacking amongst pre-2014 Sunni political leaders and they have also secured greater access to sources of patronage through their association with Baghdad-linked power brokers. It may be too early to say with any degree of certainty but this may signal the emergence of new leaders at the local level who may supplant the pre-2014 Sunni political elite at the provincial level.

These changes are creating new dynamics, some of which are benign others of which are not. Older frames of reference that may have served our understanding of Iraq prior to 2014 have been rendered less useful by more recent events. For example, the prism of sectarian division – never fully convincing or useful on its own – is especially dated today. Indeed, a silver lining to the calamities of 2014 is that it created unlikely partnerships that have survived and multiplied in the years since. In that context, it seems that existential fear of the PMU amongst Sunnis has given way to a more nuanced view borne of first-hand interaction with elements of the PMU: one [survey](#) found that between January 2016 and March 2017, there was a 22 per cent increase in the number of people in western Iraq who viewed the PMU in a positive light. The point here is not to suggest that Sunni-Shia competition is at an end (as long as groups exist there will always be potential for rivalry). Rather, it is to highlight the fact that, as a result of 2014, Arab Iraqis have gone beyond the sort of zero-sum sect-coded conflict of earlier years: the sectarian 'other' may be loved or hated but is no longer seen as an existential threat.

Perhaps most important is that the irreversibility of the post-2003 order is more accepted today than ever before. Be it Iraqi Sunnis or regional Arab states, the empowerment of Iraq's Shia and Shia-centric political actors is no longer a contentious issue: it is a fact of life. This has had several implications for the evolution of Iraqi politics. For one thing, it has mandated a more mature Shia politics that cannot shelter itself from the presumed exigencies of sectarian conflict. Even at the height of the war against IS and despite the genuine popularity of that war, mass protests against the failures of the Iraqi state were regularly mobilized in Shia majority areas of Iraq including the capital. To some scholars, this signified a welcome shift [from identity politics to issue politics](#).

Renewed (Arab) Iraqi Nationalism

In as early as 2015, it was clear that the war against IS was reinvigorating a [jingoistic Iraqi nationalism](#), the likes of which had not been seen since the 1980's and the Iran-Iraq war. The perceived legitimacy and the popularity of the war against IS have generated a degree of goodwill that needs to be capitalised on while it lasts. In Arab Iraq, one discerns elements of a new mythology of Iraqi nationalism that has emerged in the wake of the calamities of 2014: national salvation was not attained by a foreign occupation (2003) nor was it realized by small clandestine parties such as those that opposed the Ba'th; rather, in this emerging, though by no means hegemonic, narrative, national salvation has been attained through a popular, mass self-sacrifice of the Iraqi forces – especially in the idealized form of the PMU volunteers – that fought IS and liberated Iraq. In that regard, this narrative echoes similar mythologies of nationalism that emerged out of major wars such as Russia's 'Great Patriotic War' or Iran's 'Sacred Defence' – a reference to WWII and the Iran–Iraq War respectively.

One of the many manifestations of these shifts is how Iraq's various security forces are perceived. Back in 2006, and even as recently as 2014, it was common to hear opponents of the Iraqi state and even some mainstream Sunni politicians, refer to the Iraqi armed forces as 'Safavid forces' (i.e. they were serving Iranian interests) or to the Iraqi army as 'Maliki's army'. Today, such language would fall beyond the pale: it is now obligatory to extend the legitimacy of the war against IS to those waging it. Praising Iraq's armed forces (including paramilitary forces) is now a compulsory part of Iraqi political parlance. This has been abundantly evident in the pronouncements of political figures and in how the Mosul operations have been perceived and debated in parliament in recent months.

The resurgent Iraqi nationalism felt across Arab Iraq, the goodwill generated by the fight against IS, the cooperation it engendered and the related decline in sect-centric politics provide Iraq with a window of opportunity. It is an undoubtedly time-limited window but with enough political will, it may help Iraq move beyond the politics of perpetual crisis that have pervaded Iraq since 2003. To do so, Iraq will need to navigate its numerous challenges while taking advantage of its strengths and opportunities. With Iraq seemingly at yet another crossroads, it would be useful to take stock of these factors when considering the future.

Iraq is not Syria

It is common to see Iraq and Syria – and sometimes Libya and Yemen as well – mentioned in the same breath as part of one singular continuum of conflict. There are many reasons for the linkage with Syria, not least of which is IS, but this reason can only be pushed so far. It is important to bring in this comparison to avoid conflating the two countries as one single entity just because they were part of the ISIS stronghold. A number of reasons help us understand why we can paint a more optimistic political future of Iraq as compared to Syria.

For one thing, the Iraqi state and the Iraqi government are accepted and recognised internationally in a way that the Syrian regime is not. By extension, Iraq is connected to international institutions and frameworks and systems of global governance in a way that Syria is not. More immediately, Iraq is not as regionally contentious as it was in the past. On the contrary, it enjoys relatively stable and cordial relations with all regional states barring Israel. Even Iraq's often problematic bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia have [improved in recent months](#).

Internally, Iraq has greater institutional coherence than Syria, Yemen or Libya have at the moment. Even though they are paragons of waste and ineffectiveness, the mere existence of somewhat functioning ministries, a parliament and other political institutions puts Iraq ahead of its fellow Middle Eastern conflict zones and gives it something to potentially build on. Similarly, Iraq's electoral politics, peaceful protest movements and more or less free press are all essential tools that could potentially help facilitate political change and progress.

Finally, Iraq has oil and a functioning oil industry. With better prices and better management, Iraq could potentially raise the seed money needed for its recovery. Equally important is the ability of oil reserves to bestow on Baghdad a gravitational pull that has thus far held the country together.

Challenges Ahead

While there is undoubtedly room for cautious optimism today, it is worth noting that Iraq has had windows of opportunity before (2008-2010 come to mind) and these were ultimately squandered. Indeed, there are a number of challenging dynamics that militate against a positive trajectory for Iraq.

Firstly, despite the notable successes against IS and despite the destruction of their 'caliphate', IS still retains the ability to wage an insurgency against Iraq. Furthermore, given the structural weaknesses of the Iraqi state and the volatile regional climate, Iraq will likely continue to suffer from an acute terror threat for many years to come. If mismanaged, this can act as a drain on resources, a distraction from much needed structural reform, a driver of polarisation and a strain on social cohesion.

A more immediate concern is the tremendous cost of the recent victories against IS. Iraq's minister of planning puts the cost of rehabilitating physical infrastructure at [USD \\$100 billion](#) and it is as yet unclear as to who will foot the bill. When ISIS/IS rampaged through Iraq in 2014, oil was selling at around the \$100 mark; today it is about half of that. Iraqi oil revenue, which accounts for about 95% of Iraq's budget, barely covered operating costs in 2017. With a grossly inflated public sector, the Iraqi state is an expensive venture with salaries taking up to 80% of some Ministries' budgets. Low oil prices have meant that Iraq has struggled to cover its monthly operating costs in 2017 and has had no money for capital investment or for reconstruction. This situation is likely to continue at this critical moment: whatever goodwill has been generated by the hardships and sacrifices of the past three years will not last long if devastated areas are not rehabilitated, if [over a million](#)

[displaced Iraqis](#) continue to exist in limbo, and security services and a reasonable degree of economic prosperity are not provided.

Equally challenging and equally important is the emotional side of rehabilitation: justice, reconciliation and dealing with the [traumas](#) of IS and year-on-year conflict. As with physical reconstruction, Iraq lacks the capacity to adequately meet the challenge. As several [studies](#) have shown, Iraq's justice system lacks the expertise, the tools and the manpower to handle the massive challenge of administering justice in the wake of IS. The scale of the IS phenomenon is such that varying degrees of complicity are fairly common in communities that fell under its rule. Addressing this and managing the desire for retribution will be a key step towards securing a stable future. At the moment, there is no national level reconciliation initiative. Rather, we have seen the uneven spread of local initiatives. There is some merit to this approach and it has been met with [significant success](#) in some places. However, the gravity of the situation requires a more uniformly positive picture.

Provincial and parliamentary elections scheduled for next year and the [Kurdish independence referendum](#) scheduled for late September will likely drive polarisation, raise tensions and act as a magnet for regional and international intervention. Irrespective of whether the [Kurdish referendum](#) is the culmination of a national project or its cynical manipulation by a Kurdish President beset by seemingly insoluble crises, it has mobilized passions and tensions that may escape the control of its architects. This is particularly worrying with regards to the [disputed internal boundaries](#) and particularly the oil-rich and contested region of Kirkuk.

Next year's elections will reflect the fact that Iraqi politics has undergone exceptional fragmentation over the last two electoral cycles. The grand ethnic and sect-centric electoral alliances of 2005 have long been a thing of the past [despite Iran's wishes](#) for Shia electoral solidarity. Given demographic realities, the nature of power relations in post-2003 Iraq and the disarray of Iraq's Sunni political classes, Iraqi politics will continue to be dominated by Shia political actors. However, these actors are bitterly divided with the most salient axis of political contestation likely being that between Prime Minister Haider al Abadi and former Prime Minister and fellow Da'wa Party member Nuri al Maliki and his allies.

The elections will undoubtedly yield a coalition government but who gains the upper hand between [Maliki and Abadi](#) will be crucial to the future of Iraq. Abadi presents himself as the champion of a more conciliatory, somewhat western-leaning, institutions-based, reform-minded Iraqi nationalism. Maliki on the other hand is seen as the strongman nationalist mandated by the political and security exigencies of Iraq. He is also unambiguously sympathetic to Iran and hostile towards the U.S. and practically every major state in the region besides Iran. In short, Maliki (or more precisely his proxies as it is almost impossible for him to return to the Prime Minister's office) can be seen as the Iran-leaning 'axis-of-resistance' option for Iraq.

The reality is that it is not a question of either/or: both currents, and others, not least of which will be Muqtada al Sadr's reform-tinted populism, will be represented in the next government. What is to be decided is the balance of power between them which in turn will

be reflected in Iraq's geopolitical positioning and its foreign and domestic policy, all of which touches on the nature of power in Iraq and the [limits](#) on the Prime Minister or indeed the limits on any single political actor in Iraq. Political power in Iraq is best imagined in the shape of a fluid connectivity chart rather than a solid pyramid: a collection of power centres and power brokers of varying strength and influence who combine to form 'the state' even if contradictions, antagonisms and outright enmity abound between some of these nodes of power. Therefore, the state – let alone the government – is a brittle concept in today's Iraq particularly because the various contradictory nodes of power that make up the state are in turn linked to a collection of foreign powers and patrons who are equally likely to work at cross-purposes. It is within that context, complete with its attendant channels of patronage and influence that the coming elections need to be viewed. It is a context that has proven resistant to political reform.

The final and perhaps most debilitating challenge facing Iraq and one that augments all other challenges, is the corruption, incompetence and ineffectiveness of Iraq's political classes. The shifting realities outlined in this paper have placed new pressures on Iraq's political classes and rendered many of their tried and tested tropes redundant. However, their entrenchment means that the coming elections will likely reproduce the system albeit in reshuffled form. However, they will have to adapt to the changing pressures they face from above and from below and this may hopefully create the openings needed for new political forces to emerge further down the line.

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